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ABSTRACT

The reading interests of a group of older adults were examined. Subjects were 16 adults between the ages of 50 and 85 who read five stories from "Readers' Digest" short story collections and who responded to a questionnaire about their preferences for the stories, their reading habits and interests, and the appealing elements of the stories. The results of the study of preferences for the five stories showed that participants preferred happy stories with moral characters. Overall, the subjects indicated a wide variety of reading interests and a continuing interest in reading into older adulthood. Two problems indicated by the respondents were the legibility of print and the trouble they had in finding interesting things to read. In terms of Erickson's developmental theory, these subjects seemed to be in the stage of integrity versus despair, wherein they questioned whether they had had full and productive lives, whether their lives had made a difference. Reading about characters who had met with success in living and who had been rewarded for it was seemingly very appealing for this age group. (RL)

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THE PREFERENCES OF A SELECTED GROUP OF OLDER READERS
FOR FIVE BIOGRAPHICAL SHORT STORIES

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Introduction

While reading is a functional tool for all adults, few adults read to any great extent for pleasure. When people begin to approach or actually reach retirement, few adults begin reading as a hobby, even though time for reading should be abundant. Still, it has been suggested that reading can be an enjoyable pastime for the retiree if concentration is given to reaching this group of older adults (Kingston, 1979).

Several characteristics seem to be shared by the older adults who do enjoy reading. They are well-educated and have been lifelong readers (Moshey, 1972; Sharon, 1973). Generally people who have been in professions that require a great deal of reading continue reading for pleasure after retirement (Moshey, 1972). In addition, good readers beget good readers, with retirees reporting parents and grandparents who read to them when they were children. While the number of well-educated lifelong readers is expanding with each generation, only a small proportion of all people called older adults at this time are motivated to read for pleasure. And with media innovations, many well-educated people in the future may never enjoy reading for pleasure.

One of the keys to motivating people, and especially adults, is to provide interesting material for them. Yet, little research has been done on what materials interest the older adult, or if more older adults would read if relevant and

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enjoyable materials were presented to them.

The scant amount of available research studies on the interests of the older adult show that they prefer short articles or short stories as opposed to full-length books or novels. Light materials with no obscenities are preferred, with romances, mysteries, and religious materials being listed as favorites (Moshey, 1972; Romani, 1973). Analysis of reading interests on the basis of Erickson's psycho-social developmental traits of the age group indicate the elderly prefer nostalgic types of writing that allow for reminiscing; this includes historical pieces. In addition, their need to assess their own lives lends itself to an interest in autobiographical materials that provide for comparison of their own life contribution to another person's (Moshey, 1972).

The information available on the interests of older adults has all been obtained from survey data collected by having people who indicate their reading preferences on a checklist or open-ended form. No research to date has used the findings on interest to assess interest in particular, pre-selected stories, as a means of examining interestingness more carefully.

The purpose of this study is to examine the interests of a group of older readers in five selected short stories that are historical or reminiscent and are biographical. In addition, general information on reading interests of this group will be discussed.

Sample

Sixteen adults between the ages of 50 and 85 were respondents in this study (see Table 1). Eleven females and five males, from various parts of the U.S. participated. Four participants were from Idaho, three from Kentucky, three from Florida, three from Pennsylvania, and three from southern California. All participants were well-educated. Five finished high school, two finished college, and two had completed graduate work. Three participants had some college and three had vocational training beyond high school.

Materials

Five stories were selected for this study from Readers' Digest short story collections. All stories had been used previously in reading groups with older readers in Athens, Georgia and Pocatello, Idaho, and were listed as favorite selections by the participants in those reading groups.

The stories were all biographical, non-fiction, and on a sixth to seventh grade readability level. The stories were:

- 1) "Country Doctor" by Helen Graham Rezzatto - about a small town doctor who lived during the early childhood of the participants in this study.
- 2) "Tender Comrade" by Austin Strong - portraying the role of Robert Louis Stevenson's wife in supporting and loving her husband.
- 3) "Angel from Maine" by Robert P. Tristram Coffin - describing the role of a mother raising her children on the frontier islands of Maine.
- 4) "Goat Gland Brinkley" by Harold Mehling - a charlatan and trickster who pedalled his sex-potency potion through the early days of radio.
- 5) "How Stalin Relieved Spain of \$600 Million" by Alexander Orlov - a story of a plot masterminded by Stalin to remove gold from the Spanish treasury.

Method

Each participant received copies of the five stories printed in large type and a two page questionnaire by mail. A cover letter and stamped return envelope accompanied the materials. Participants were asked to read the stories and respond to the questionnaire. Of seventeen people contacted for this study, sixteen responded.

Questionnaire

On the questionnaire, participants were asked to rank the five stories in order of preference and to indicate any ties or close choices for most favorite and least favorite story. Participants were asked to indicate literary elements of the stories that were appealing to them and to elaborate on what makes a story interesting. Finally, their reading habits were assessed, including what they like to read, where they get reading material, how much time they spend in

reading per week, and whether they can find materials of interest to read. Space was allowed on the questionnaire for explanation of answers and any additional comments.

Results

A rank order of preference was computed (see Table 2) by assigning every vote of first place five points, second place four points, and so forth. Each story's points were totalled. Since one participant ranked only his number one choice, that mark was not included in this tabulation, and the point totals were based on 15 participants. The highest possible point total, if a story had received all 15 first place votes, was 75.

"Country Doctor" was the most preferred story with a rank of 62 points. "Tender Comrade" followed with a rank of 60 points. "Goat Gland Brinkley" received a point total of 39, "Angel from Maine" a total of 35. "How Stalin Relieved Spain of \$600 Million" received 24 points.

Respondents were asked if any stories came close to tying for first place. Four people indicated liking "Tender Comrade," "Country Doctor," and "Angel from Maine" almost equally. Two more respondents liked "Tender Comrade" and "Country Doctor" equally and two tied "Tender Comrade" and "Angel from Maine." One final person indicated a close tie of "Tender Comrade" with "How Stalin Relieved Spain of \$600 Million."

When asked about ties or close votes for least favorite story, eight indicated an equal dislike for "Goat Gland Brinkley" and "How Stalin Relieved Spain of \$600 Million." One disliked "Angel from Maine" equally with the Stalin story, indicating "Angel" was fanciful and self-serving.

When asked to check all the literary elements that make something interesting (see Table 3), all sixteen respondents listed character. Twelve indicated the ending of the story contributes to interestingness. Place and time

setting were indicated by nine, and length, plot, and being like someone they knew by six each. Only two respondents indicated that relation to their own life contributed to interestingness.

An open-ended question on what makes material interesting yielded additional information. Five indicated reading about places they have been and people they have heard about is interesting. Seven indicated enjoying moral, upstanding characters (i.e. not Stalin or Brinkley) and two indicated they were offended by obscenity. Four responded that a familiarity with plot, setting, or character based on past school learning made material interesting. Two felt interestingness could not be broken down into components.

In addition to the information on interestingness of these stories, participants were questioned about their reading habits. In asking about general ease in finding interesting materials to read, 11 found it easy to find material to read. The five who did not were all over age 70. When asked to indicate all places they get reading materials (see Table 4), 11 indicated the library. Seven subscribed to magazines, six borrowed from friends, and five bought books. Two were given books as gifts. When asked about time spent reading per week (see Table 5), two read 0 - 5 hours a week. These were both people who were still working. Three read 6 - 10 hours; five read 11 - 15 hours. One read 16 - 20 hours, three 21 - 25 hours, and one above 25 hours a week. One person indicated reading time varied, depending on other obligations and interests.

When asked to list types of materials they like to read, a wide variety of responses were given (see Table 6). Respondents could list as many categories as they wanted. Predominant choices were biography/autobiography/human interest, and newspapers/magazines/ current events. Noticeable omissions were science fiction and modern fictional best sellers. A number of subjects continue to read professional or academic materials. Historical materials were also indicated as a preference.

Discussion

Results of the study of preference for the five stories shows that participants prefer happy stories with moral characters. "Country Doctor," a story of a self-sacrificing doctor being rewarded for being nice, was the favorite of the five stories. "Tender Comrade," the story of a woman's selfless commitment to her husband, was ranked second among the stories. Both of these stories are biographies of characters who are recognized by others for being good. This is in keeping with previous research findings (Moshey, 1972; Romani, 1973; Sharon, 1973).

It is interesting to note that "Angel from Maine," a story that is also happy and moral was disliked by some participants because it seemed fanciful and hackneyed. One participant tersely wrote, "I hate fiction," in response to this story. The story is not fiction, but evidently is written in a style that closely parallels fiction. This points up the role of author's style in producing appealing stories.

The Stalin story was the most disliked of the stories. Participants indicated that this was because the story reminded them of World War II, a gloomy era in their lives. For many, the story called up anger they felt over the Allies being duped by Stalin. These comments point up the role of affect and background experience in reading, for participants tended to respond to Stalin the man rather than to the short story, per se.

"Goat Gland Brinkley" was the story with the most varied responses. About half the participants indicated they disliked the character, a charlatan, and did not enjoy reading about his sex potions made of goat glands. The other half rated the story high because they remembered Brinkley from the early days of radio and found the memories of how he conned the public to be very humorous. The group that did not remember Brinkley were turned off to an amoral character and a racey topic. For those who remembered him, the reminiscences outweighed other factors and made this an enjoyable story.

Overall, this group indicated a wide variety of reading interests and a continuing interest in reading into older adulthood. Two problems indicated by respondents in this study must be noted. One involves legibility of print. The stories were typed in large type, but the particular type used replaced lower case letters with smaller capital letters. One participant near 85 and who does not wear glasses indicated that this made the stories very difficult to read, and caused a great deal of fatigue. Several others found they could only read one story at a sitting. More research needs to be done into what types of print are most legible for aging eyes. People who work with the elderly -- social workers, recreational group leaders, government workers -- need to be aware of the reading problems caused by print legibility.

A second point is that one-third of the participants in this study indicated trouble finding interesting things to read. All of these were people over the age of 70. It has long been hinted in studies that the elderly might have trouble finding reading materials. Perhaps, since the group of people who are healthy and active beyond age 70 is a new segment of the population, publishers have not caught up with the demands of this age group, or have assumed they are like younger adults in tastes and attitudes. More research pointed directly toward the interests of this age group is needed.

This study indicates an interest in biographical material with moral characters. While actual knowledge of a person written about (Brinkley) can override this preference, generally happy, reminiscent stories are most enjoyed. These findings fit in terms of developmental theory, also. The older adult is in the stage of Integrity vs. Despair (Erickson, 1968). In this stage, people question whether they have had full and productive lives, whether their lives have made a difference. Reading about characters who have met with success in living and have been rewarded for it is seemingly very appealing for this age group. More

concentration on the needs and interests of the older adult may lead to a larger group of elderly who enjoy reading as a pastime.

Summary

A study was conducted with sixteen older adults asking them to rank five stories in order of preference and to respond to questions on their reading interests and habits. The group preferred happy stories about moral characters who were rewarded for being good. Various phases of interest and reading habits were discussed.

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Table 1

Characteristics of Participants

Sex	Age	Educational Level	
Female-11	50-59- 3	High School-	5
Male - 5	60-69- 4	Some College-	3
	70-79- 7	Post High School	
		Vocational-Tech.-	3
	80-89- 2	College Graduate-	3
		Graduate Work-	2

Table 2

Preference for Stories (N=15)

	1st Place	2nd Place	3rd Place	4th Place	5th Place
Tender Comrade	6 40%	6 40%	1 7%	1 7%	1 7%
Country Doctor	6 40%	5 33%	4 26%	0 0%	0 0%
Angel from Maine	0 0%	2 13%	6 40%	5 33%	2 13%
Goat Gland Brinkley	3 20%	1 7%	2 13%	5 33%	4 26%
How Stalin Relieved Spain . . .	0 0%	1 7%	2 13%	4 26%	8 53%

Note:  indicates number and percent of participants assigning each rank.

Table 3

Literary Elements Making a Story Interesting (N=16)

Literary Element	Number	% of Total N
Character	16	100%
Plot	6	38%
Ending	12	75%
Length	6	38%
Place Setting	9	56%
Time Era	9	56%
Like Someone You Knew	6	38%
Like Your Own Life	2	13%

Table 4

Means of Obtaining Reading Materials (N=16)

Means	% of Total N
Buy	31%
Subscribe	50%
Borrow	44%
Library	69%
Gifts	13%
Don't Bother	6%

Note: Participants could respond in any or all categories.

Table 5

Time Spent Reading Per Week (N=16)

Hours	Percent
0-5	13%
6-10	19%
11-15	38%
16-20	6%
21-25	19%
26-30	6%
Varies	6%

Table 6

Materials Enjoyed for Reading (N=16)

Material	% of Total N
I. Biography/ Autobiography/ Human Interest	63%
II. Newspapers/ Magazines/ Current Events	56%
III. Professional Materials	31%
IV. Historical	25%
V. Short Stories	19%
VI. Light Fiction	19%
VII. Religious	19%

Note: Participants could respond in any or all categories.